

JOHN BERGER: BETWEEN PERMANENT RED AND THE BLACK BOX OF THE UNIVERSE

by Nikos Papastergiadis

“If creativity seeks companionship with the universe, then it begins
in the process of collaboration”



Nikos Papastergiadis and John Berger, Quincy, France, 1995

HOW DOES ART OFFER AN IMAGE OF THE WORLD, and how does the imagination create a world? The fascination with the transformative function of the imagination has never dropped from the centre of John Berger's practice as an artist, writer and critic. In the fifties and sixties, Berger was an outspoken advocate of social realism and had little patience with the formalist perspectives in art criticism. Formal innovations are important for him but they are never seen in a vacuum; they always come hand in hand with aspirations for social transformation. This axiomatic interweaving of the politics of art and the art of politics has always characterised his writing. Berger's politics is, as he has reaffirmed in *Hold Everything Dear* (2007), still Marxist, but in my opinion his outlook now also attends to the relationship between creativity and cosmology.

This complex outlook is most evident in Berger's recent evocation of the places of belonging in *Bento's Sketchbook* (2011). Through the juxtaposition of stories in which strangers find momentary recognition of each other in small gestures of hospitality, to the meditations on the writing of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, Berger provides an optic that oscillates between the banalities of everyday life and the widest horizons of the cosmos. Belonging is not exclusively pinned to a singular point of origin in this world. It is not even tied to a transnational ideology. It is embedded in something that is wider and deeper. Our view is open to the horizons of the infinite and yet focused on the production of a form that can make the infinite comprehensible. Aesthesis begins with this kind of sensory awareness of the world and aesthetic imagination takes on the task of embracing the whole.

To put it briefly, I will argue that throughout Berger's writing we can trace the outline of a double claim on the historical modality of the aesthetic imagination, which produces images that come out of history but are not bound by or the sum of specific historical forces. Imagination simultaneously reassembles elements that exist in a given period and also reproduces them anew.

In the midst of Cold War-period debates on art and politics, Berger asserted in *Permanent Red* (1960) that “imagination is not, as it is sometimes thought, the ability to invent; it is the capacity to disclose that which exists” (p. 61). At this point in time, the revelatory function of the imagination was given a determinant role over all other dimensions. The duty of the artist was defined in terms of a pursuit of truth. Thus art was understood to deliver more virtuous forms of ethical conduct and express a transformative agenda of radical politics. It was imbued with an important corrective task: to clarify ambiguities, break through restrictions and overcome false hierarchies. Through art we could *see through* the distortions that blurred reality, blocked solidarity and delayed justice.

In the past decade, while these ethical commitments and political values have been reaffirmed, there has also been a stronger attention to aesthetics. Berger has neither retreated into an academic fascination with aesthetic theory, nor adopted a position of mystical detachment. His attempt to articulate the visions of the world that are constructed by other artists is also an approach that makes his own sensory awareness of the world more explicit. By focusing on the manner in which art makes a world even as it represents the world, Berger is extending his understanding of the function of the imagination beyond an evaluation of its political objectives and ethical sincerity. His observations of the social and political conditions that are represented in a specific work of art are now more directly linked to ruminations on how an artwork is expressive of a general vision of our surroundings.

This process of rumination gives greater credence to the use of sensory faculties for grasping the realm of what is possible in the world. From this perspective, art not only reveals an existing truth but also provides the means for exploring new connections and wider resonances. For instance, of Cézanne's late paintings, Berger notes the “complementarity between the equilibrium of the body and the inevitability of landscape” by comparing his depiction of rocks in a forest to the intimacy of armpits. Berger sees these paintings as prophetic expressions about creation. The creation of the world appears in the sense of expectancy that comes from the minute interplay between the animate and inanimate. The revelatory function of art is complemented with a connective and harmonic version of aesthetics.

Berger's account of how creative acts are interpreted has seemingly shifted from a form of strident and activist critique to a more poetic and open-ended process of engagement. In the early period, from the fifties to the late seventies, he defined the role of the critic in rather combative terms, fighting the evil that oppresses people: the task of the critic was to show how an artist's work can provide a deeper sense of human wholeness and what Berger termed an “expanded awareness of our potentiality”. In his most recent essays, while his attention to the political details of oppression has not diminished, there is an attempt to address these within a broader framework. This is not an entirely new step; rather, it is a move from ideological critique towards a genre that gives more space to the sensory awareness of the actual world. This genre resembles the mode of writing that Michael Taussig calls “fabulation” and Bruno Latour “poetic writing”. Reflecting on his own critical approach, Berger tells us in *About Looking* (1980) that his attention is often captured by a “living” detail and explains how this provides an entry point into the wider “field” of the work. However, in a later essay, he reflects on his approach in a more enigmatic

manner. He recounts a dream in which he was standing before a swinging door, but then teases us by stating that he “magically unremembered” how it opened. These are tantalising comments, invoking tension between the boundless whole and the grounded particular that recurs in all of Berger’s reflexive statements on art. The organising principle of creativity requires both human intimacy and a cosmic sweep. Berger does not shirk from this magnificent duty. His 2001 essay on the double movement of creation, “Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible (for Yves)” (in *The Shape of a Pocket*), concludes with the words of the Chinese painter Shitao: “The brush is for saving things from chaos.”

Creation Stories as Companionship

In the opening sentences of *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Berger posits: “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it speaks.” This highlights the priority of sensory awareness to *logos* – the articulation of thought into language. However, it is the following passage that catapults us from the source of the senses to the widest frame, as he states that this aesthetic knowledge is the attempt “to establish our place in the surrounding world”. Most of *Ways of Seeing* is a trenchant polemic against the restrictions that ‘normalise’ the modes of perception in capitalist societies. However, it also provides an evocation of the inherent potential to revitalise and expand our consciousness of the indivisible experience of being surrounded by the world. Considerable attention has been given to the polemical aspect of Berger’s writing, but not to his poetic awareness of the cosmos.

“Ways of seeing” usually refers to a ‘patterned’ mode of perception that reflects a personal inclination, a cultural disposition or at best a global consciousness. Amongst artists this pattern is expressed in a specific aesthetic form. It provides a reference point that coils its way throughout their life’s work. This process of aesthetic reiteration is usually addressed as a consequence of psychological drives or as a persistent response to intractable social issues. It is presumed that the artist returns to this *topos*, or persists with a specific *tropos*, because the psyche has been locked into an obsessive and compulsive mode. Or else there is the view that the structures of social conflict are of such indomitable force that the artist cannot help continually coming back to confront social tensions. These two models would restrict the function of creativity to being a consequence of the individual’s psychic makeup or a confrontation with the inevitable forces of social inequality. But Berger’s writing on art and creativity can also be explored from another perspective. The third way would consider whether a way of seeing is also expressive of the link between the artistic imaginary and cosmology. It would turn to face the way the visible order carries within it multiple dimensions and is open to new formations.

“Our customary visible order is not the only one: it co-exists with other orders. Stories of fairies, sprites, ogres were a human attempt to come to terms with this co-existence. Hunters are continually aware of it and so can read signs we do not see. Children feel it intuitively because they have the habit of hiding behind things. There they discover the interstices between different sets of the visible.”

In this passage from the collection of essays *The Shape of a Pocket* (p. 5), Berger teases out the keen sensitivities and wide-eyed sensibilities that allow artists to find connections we would normally gloss over in everyday life. However, the point of this evocation of co-existent sets of the visible is neither simply a reconnaissance mission of missing signs, nor an excavation of the ruined symbols that would otherwise disappear from the field of vision. Rather, it is a more ambiguous gesture of registration of multiple and more supple ways of seeing. How do we mark out the features

of this ‘creative’ way of seeing, and how is it connected to a way of living with the world – and by this I mean not just the earth, but the cosmos as a whole?

Despite a lifetime of writing on artistic creativity and throughout his persistent reflections on the ontological bonds that link a person to the world, there is no explicit creation story in Berger’s work. In his meditative book *And Our Faces, As Brief as Photos* (1984), he drew on Mircea Eliade’s examination of the mythological accounts that posit a connection between a person, their ancestry, the home and the universe.

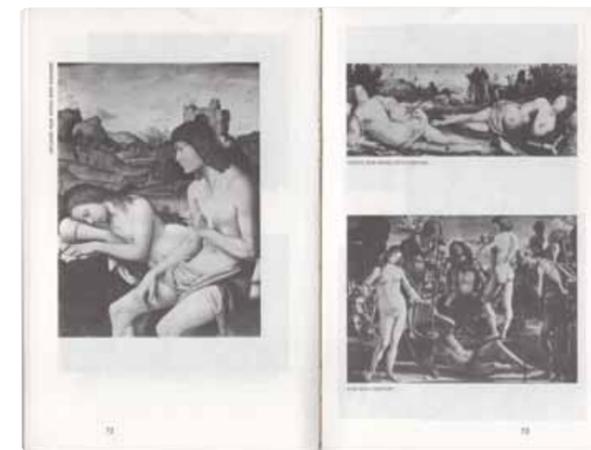
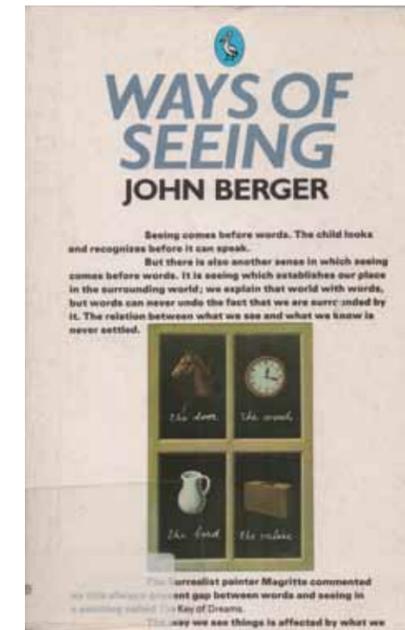
“Originally home meant the centre of the world – not in a geographical, but in an ontological sense. Mircea Eliade has demonstrated how home was the place from which the world could be *founded*. A home was established, as he says, “at the heart of the real.” In traditional societies, everything that made sense of the world was real; the surrounding chaos existed and was threatening, but it was threatening because it was *unreal*. Without a home at the centre of the real, one was not only shelterless, but also lost in nonbeing, in unreality. Without a home everything was fragmentation.

Home was the centre of the world because it was the place where a vertical line crossed with a horizontal one. The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represented the traffic of the world, all the possible roads leading across the earth to other places. Thus, at home, one was nearest to the gods in the sky and to the dead of the underworld. This nearness promised access to both. And at the same time, one was at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all terrestrial journeys.” (pp. 55-56)

The intersection between the vertical and horizontal axes is for Berger the nexus at which meaning both arises and is secured. It is simultaneously a confirmation point and a platform for critical self-understanding. This is a crucial conjunction. While Berger rejects the simplistic modern tales that equate individual freedom with leaving home, he is also not proclaiming that ancient cultural values are static. What is at stake is a more complex negotiation between the vicissitudes of an individual’s life history and the wisdom that is condensed into cultural values. Rather than rejecting traditional cultures as being mired in superstition and bound by oppressive hierarchies, Berger is more concerned in exploring the ways they provide a source of knowledge that can furnish contemporary guidance and understanding. In the more recent collection of essays on art and the politics of resistance, *Hold Everything Dear* (2007), Berger recalls a gesture of consolation from the Islamic tradition.

“A small brass bowl called a Fear Cup. Engraved with filigree geometric patterns and some verses from the Koran arranged in the form of a flower. Fill it with water and leave it outside under the stars for a night. Then drink the water whilst praying that it will alleviate the pain and cure you. For many sicknesses the Fear Cup is clearly less effective than a course of antibiotics. But a bowl of water which has reflected the time of the stars, the same water from which every living thing was made, as is said in the Koran, may help resist the stranglehold.” (p. 73)

The strength of this sentimental gesture is that it establishes water as the conductor of the universe’s life force. While antibiotics can cure by eliminating some harmful bacteria, it is water that is adopted as the medium that connects the individual with the universe. Berger claims that this symbolic act of union provides



All IMAGES: Pages from the book *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb and Richard Hollis (BBC and Penguin, London, 1972). Based on the BBC television series with John Berger

a sense of release from the crippling feeling of helplessness and insignificance. It takes away the pain of feeling isolated. Towards the end of the book he quotes from the Caribbean cultural theorist Edouard Glissant, who argues that “the way to resist globalization is [...] to imagine what is the first sum of all possible particularities and to get used to the idea that, as long as a single particularity is missing, globality will not be what it should be for us” (p. 117). He then adds quotations from Emily Dickinson, Spinoza and contemporary resistance fighters that express wonder at the ever-present manifestation of the eternal and compare the freedom gained from the overthrow of tyranny to the reclamation of the power to create the world anew.

Some common elements and a recurring structure can be found in these stories. They contain a shared pathway that moves from isolation to connection, and they promote a political view on equality and freedom that includes the sense of wonder. Crosscutting these narratives of social solidarity and political emancipation is the work of imagination. From these stories, we can see how the source and frame of creativity is presented not just in terms of its outcomes, such as its capacity to give new form to the meaning of either an object or a relationship with others in the world; it is also intimated that creativity stems from a desire for companionship.

And expressing the desire for companionship is at the heart of Berger’s evocation of creation, not merely the production of a pure idea that can acquire material form, or the discovery of a source from which growth proceeds. It is of note that when Berger acknowledges that Michelangelo was a figure who “assumed at the very last possible historical moment [...] the Renaissance role of the artist as supreme creator”, his focus is not on the majesty of formal compositions – for this would be akin to staring at the finger when God was pointing to the light – but on the perverse conjuring of the very act of creation. For Michelangelo, this creation story was itself a manifestation of a creation fantasy. Staring up at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Berger notices that this male artist assumed the ability of giving birth: “The whole ceiling is really about Creation and for him, in the last coil of his longing, Creation meant everything imaginable being born, thrusting and flying from between men’s legs.” (“Michelangelo”, *The Shape of a Pocket*, p. 98-99)

For the generation of art critics that preceded Berger, such as Herbert Read and Kenneth Clark, the idea of the artist as Promethean creator was a given. One of the primary functions of *Ways of Seeing* was to establish an alternative frame for interpreting the ‘mysterious forms’ of art and provide a more grounded approach for evaluating the agency of the artist. Hence, in a later essay, Berger makes explicit his rejection of the illusion that the artist stands above society, draws on mystical forces and creates new forms with divine authority. Berger insists that there is no real autogenesis in art. He sees artists as receivers and beneficiaries of signs being sent to them. Creation comes from the artist’s ability to give form to what they have received. Hence, if creativity seeks companionship with the universe, then it begins in the process of collaboration.

To conclude, Berger’s early work adopted an internationalist perspective on art and politics that was closely affiliated to the New Left. This robust cosmopolitan vision was embedded in an anti-colonial and transnational revolutionary ideology. However, Berger also confessed to being both a “bad Marxist”, in that he had an aversion to power, and a “romantic” who upheld the capacity for subjective intuitions to keep him open to the mysteries of art, love and the universe. The interplay between this overt political stance and implicit subjective union with others has taken new dimensions in his recent writings on art. It has led to a cosmopolitan belonging that combines a celestial and terrestrial sense of unity.